



ROBERT BURNS

And the Poetic Image

Gallery Guide
Harold B. Lee Library
Level Three Gallery

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When Walter Scott was still a boy, and long before he became an internationally acclaimed novelist, he happened to meet Robert Burns. The impressions of that encounter with his countryman remained with him all his life. They even colored his memory, as Scott confessed in a letter he wrote to Thomas Carlyle in 1827, five years before his death. Of Alexander Nasmyth's famous portrait of Burns, Scott complained that Burns's features there appeared "diminished as if seen in perspective." Scott's image of the poet, by contrast, was more magisterial.

P O E M S.

CHIEFLY IN THE

SCOTTISH DIALECT.

BY

ROBERT BURNS.

EDINBURGH:
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AND SOLD BY WILLIAM CRICHTON.

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Burns's *Poems* (second edition), published in Edinburgh in 1787



Ellis Farm, Robert Burns's last farmstead (1788-1791), near Auldgirth, north of Dumfries, Scotland. © Renaud Camus, 2008

I think his countenance was more massive than it looks in any of the portraits.... [His] eye alone, I think, indicated the poetical character and temperament. It was large, and of a dark cast, and glowed (I say literally glowed) when he spoke with feeling or interest. I never saw such another eye in a human head, though I have seen the most distinguished men in my time.

Scott's revisionist recollections—a trait for which he had already become famous as a historical novelist—exemplify a truism about the life, work, and legacy of Robert Burns: as great as Burns may have been during his era and in person, his image assumed even grander, more "massive" proportions in retrospect. One reason for this commemorative illusion may derive from Burns's acute emotional sensibilities, his knack for connecting with readers. This made him the virtual spokesperson for several publics, both from 1786-1796 (that is, from the moment he burst

into public consciousness until the end of his life) and also in the centuries that followed. In the nineteenth century, for example, he acquired the reputation as Scotland's national poet; he became the voice of a noble but declining rural peasantry at the historical moment of its evolution into an industrial working class, he articulated values of hearth and home for a rising British bourgeoisie; and his plucky irreverence toward institutional powers made him a folk hero for an American literati looking to escape the shadows of Europe. When we consider the multiple vocal registers of his work (Scots and English, sentimental and ribald, ironic and sincere, high and low), it becomes clear that Burns was a poet in and through whom multitudes spoke.

One reason for Burns's immediate and enduring popularity may be that he represents the image of simplicity in a modern era most often defined by its spiraling complexities. What is more, Burns seemed to recognize that



Robert Burns, 1759-1796, *Poet*, by Alexander Nasmyth, 1787

this was part of his appeal. Whereas most renowned poets in Burns's day were products of urban society and formal education (however much they affected contact with "nature"), Burns grew up on a farm and enjoyed comparatively modest schooling. But he converted his rural image into a source of significant cultural value, telling a critic, Robert Anderson, that it was "a part of the machinery ... of his poetical character to pass for an illiterate ploughman who wrote from pure inspiration." Such consciousness of social "machinery," of course, belies the presumed naiveté of his status as "illiterate ploughman." And when Anderson "pointed out some evident traces of poetical imitation in [Burns's] verses, privately, he readily acknowledged his obligations ... but in company he would not suffer his pretensions to pure inspiration to be challenged" lest it affect his peasant image and thus the sale of his work.

Burns's image and reputation continued to expand in the century following his death. By the time of the Scottish literary renaissance in the 1920s and '30s, the savviest critics no longer wrote solely about Burns's poetry and life, but rather addressed Burns as a cultural phenomenon. Hugh MacDiarmid,

the influential Scottish poet, critic, and nationalist, expressed outrage when he reflected on the historical commemoration (and, as he saw it, distortion) of Burns. The popular Burns Clubs, he said in 1934, seemingly existed "to deny that Burns was Burns," instead making the poet over into the image of "middle-class buddies" whom [Burns] would have flayed alive. Edwin Muir, MacDiarmid's peer and one-time friend, initially agreed, though he was less irate than bemused by Burns's posthumous climb up the social ladder. He remarked that "one is driven to ask what can have happened to Burns since his death to make him now the implicit property of the middle and upper classes, when he was the property of the poor man at the beginning." Muir's complaint here, similar to MacDiarmid's, was that Burns's legacy had almost fully detached itself from the man himself, to say nothing of his work. Burns had become the victim of the "machinery" he once manipulated to such brilliant effect.

But a little over a decade later, by the late 1940s, Muir seemed to have changed his mind in a way which speaks to Burns's lasting significance. Burns, he said, "is more a personage to us than a poet, more a figurehead than a personage, and more a myth than a figurehead." He has the power of making any Scotsman—or, Burns's world-wide readers might add, any person whomsoever—"more wholeheartedly himself ... and in that way perhaps more human." And so, Muir continued, when "we consider Burns we must therefore" acknowledge "the Burns cult in all its forms." We must remember, that is, that the many publics which have adopted Burns, and which have made over the poet in their own image, are Burns's "reward ... for having the temerity to express the ordinary feelings of his people, and for having become a part of their life."

It is this vital relationship between the poet, his work, and his image which the Harold B. Lee Library's Robert Burns exhibition seeks to highlight. We express our gratitude to the diligent library staff, the university's generous friends, the College of Humanities, and the Utah Scottish Association for helping to make this exhibition possible.

Cover: *Burns and the Vision*, by James Christie. Courtesy of Irvine Burns Club.

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